

AI Index AFR 60/003/2001

Public

West African Human Rights Defenders Under Attack Burkina Faso: the long and dangerous fight for justice

Norbert Zongo, a prominent journalist and human rights defender, was killed in December 1998. His death sparked off widespread social unrest and calls for an end to impunity for human rights violations in Burkina Faso. The government responded by attempting to stifle the activities of human rights defenders, through a continuing pattern of violence and intimidation and severe restrictions on freedom of expression and association.

The killing of Norbert Zongo

On 13 December 1998, *Norbert Zongo's* badly burned body was found with those of *Ernest Zongo*, *Ablasse Nikiema* and *Blaise Ilboudo* in a vehicle about 100 kilometres from the capital, Ouagadougou. There appeared to be no evidence that the vehicle had been involved in an accident.

Norbert Zongo was well known as an outspoken critic of the government of Burkina Faso and was widely respected for his independence. He was editor-in-chief of the independent weekly newspaper *L'Indépendant*, and President of the Association of Independent Newspaper Editors.

As a prominent investigative journalist, *Norbert Zongo* had been vigorously pursuing the case of the death in custody of *David Ouédraogo*, the chauffeur of President *Blaise Compaoré's* brother and presidential advisor, *François Compaoré*. *François Compaoré* was indicted a few days after *Ouédraogo's* death, but the case was transferred to a military tribunal which did not pursue the accusations. The charges against him were later dropped.

On 7 May 1999, an Independent Commission of Inquiry made public its conclusion that *Norbert Zongo* had been killed for political motives. The Commission named six members of the *Régiment de la sécurité présidentielle* (the presidential security force) as suspects. In August 2000, three members of the Presidential security force were convicted of 'assault causing death' in the case of *David Ouédraogo* and

received lengthy prison sentences. The convicted men – and one of those acquitted – are also among those named by the Commission of Inquiry as suspects in the case of Norbert Zongo. In January 2001 one of the convicted men died in prison, while in February 2001, another of the group was charged with murder and arson in the case of Norbert Zongo. It is, however, still uncertain whether those responsible for the death of Norbert Zongo and his companions will be brought to justice.

Continuing repression of human rights defenders

Following the killing of Norbert Zongo and his companions, a *Collectif d'organisations démocratiques de masse et de partis politiques* (Coalition of political groups, human rights organisations and journalists) was formed to campaign for those responsible to be brought to justice. In calling for an end to impunity and an investigation into the killing of Norbert Zongo and his three companions, members of the *Collectif* were putting their own lives at risk in defence of human rights.

Members of the prominent human rights organisation, *Mouvement burkinabè des droits de l'homme et des peuples* (MBDHP – the BurkinabP Movement for Human and Peoples= Rights) have found themselves at particular risk. On 10 May 1999, the home of Halidou Ouédraogo, President of both the MBDHP and the *Collectif*, was surrounded by a group of at least 100 people who threatened and insulted him. Although Halidou Ouédraogo lives very close to a police station, the police reportedly took two hours to respond to requests for assistance. Local groups believe that officials of the ruling party were behind this act.

In mid April 2000, several members of the *Collectif* – Halidou Ouédraogo, Tolé Sagnon, Norbert Tiendrébéogo, Dr Pierre Bidima, Etienne Traoré and Bénéwendé Sankara – were arrested at their homes. The same day, the government publicly denounced the *Collectif* for persistently violating the law and endangering public order.

All had their heads shaved in police detention – this is not standard practice and appears to have been designed to humiliate them. They were held by the *Direction de la compagnie d'intervention rapide* (DCIR), the police rapid deployment force and denied visits. They appear to have been detained solely because of their legitimate activities to end impunity for human rights violations. All were

subsequently released without charge between two days and two weeks after being taken into custody.

There has been no let-up in the attempts of the Burkina Faso authorities to stifle the activities of human rights defenders. In December 2000, representatives of human rights groups from across West Africa hoped to meet in Ouagadougou, capital of Burkina Faso, to mark the second anniversary of the killing of Norbert Zongo at an **International Festival on Freedom of the Press and Expression**. The festival was intended to serve as a commemoration of the courage of the many West African journalists who have been killed or injured in the pursuit of their legitimate work as journalists. However, the government of Burkina Faso banned all activities in connection with the festival and other local events planned by Burkinabé rights groups to coincide with the anniversary of Norbert Zongo's death. A delegation of participants arriving by road in two buses from Accra, Ghana, were denied entry into the country. Those who tried to visit Norbert Zongo's tomb were dispersed by the security forces using tear gas. The rights that Norbert Zongo and others have fought for are still denied in Burkina Faso.

Support human rights defenders in Burkina Faso !

Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in French or English or your own language to the authorities in Burkina Faso:

- 1 expressing concern for the use of violence and intimidation against human rights defenders;
- 2 urging the Burkina Faso Government to ensure that human rights defenders are not threatened, harassed and that their lives are not put at risk as a result of their legitimate activities;
- 3 urging the Burkina Faso authorities to bring to justice those members of the security forces who are suspected of killing, torturing or ill-treating human rights defenders such as Norbert Zongo and point out that they should be removed from official duties pending investigations of the allegations;
- 4 urging the Burkina Faso Government to abide by its obligations under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' rights, in particular the rights to freedom of

expression and association, by allowing everyone in the country to enjoy these rights without undue interference;

5 urging the Burkina Faso authorities to respect the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders adopted by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998ⁱ which states in article 1 that *Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels*@

Please send your letters to:

Son Excellence, Monsieur Blaise COMPAORE

PrJsident

La PrJsidence

OUAGADOUGOU

Burkina Faso

Fax: +226 31 49 26

Salutation: Monsieur le Président de la Republique / Dear President

Monsieur Boureima Badini

Ministre de la Justice et de la promotion des droits de l=homme

Garde des Sceaux

Ministre de la Justice

BP 526

OUAGADOUGOU

Burkina Faso

E-mail: dpef@fasonet.bf Fax: +226 31 71 37

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

Monsieur Bernard NabarJ

Ministre de l'Administration Territoriale et de la Decentralisation

OUAGADOUGOU

Burkina Faso

Fax: +226 31 72 00

Salutations: Monsieur le Ministre

Monsieur MJJguJ Maurice TraorJ
 PrJsident de l=AssemblJe Nationale
 AssemblJe Nationale
 BP 6482
 Ouagadougou 01
 Burkina Faso

Salutation: Monsieur le Président / Dear Hon. President

So that human rights defenders in Burkina Faso are aware of the action you have taken to support them, please send copies to:

Mouvement burkinabè des droits de l'homme et des peuples (MBDHP)
 01 BP 2055
 Ouagadougou 01
 Burkina Faso
 tel 010 226 313150, fax 010 226 313228
 mbdhp@fasonet.bf

L'Indépendant

01 BP 4809
 Ouagadougou 01
 Burkina Faso

(formerly published by Norbert Zongo and by David Sadwidi)

Lobbying of your own government

Please send letters to your Foreign Affairs Ministry - the Africa Desk or the Burkina Faso Desk in your country - expressing concern about the torture and ill-treatment of human rights defenders, journalists and outspoken members of the civil society in Burkina Faso and urging your government to raise the above-listed recommendations to the Burkina Faso government.

PLEASE WRITE AND SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY

i. UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, UN General Assembly Resolution 53/144

AI Index number: AFR 60/003/2001